

MEDIASCOPE BUFFALO: The Moving Image in and around Buffalo 1970-1995

by Marguerite W. Knowles

Some of us revel in memories of the intellectual excitement engendered by the independent media developments that Gerald O'Grady brought to Buffalo in the 70's. Like a stone tossed into Lake Erie, the ripples have continued to spread and today there is an ever expanding, burgeoning stream of media artists trained in Buffalo, creating, exploring, transforming and expanding the parameters of media art. The Western New York community has been on the cutting edge of the new media movement, and Buffalo is arguably one of the most media literate communities in America.

Dr. O'Grady came to the University at Buffalo in 1967 as a medieval specialist in the Department of English. He had become interested while at Rice University in Texas with the new media as a code of communication; at UB he was the initiator and Director of the Center for Media Study in 1972, and he founded the independent, not-for-profit media center, Media Study/Bufalo.

His concept of the wide-ranging effects and possibilities for the "new media" was universal in scope, presciently forecasting that with the advent of film, video and television cameras, broadcast industries and computer technologies there was to be a dramatic change in the way people throughout the world would receive information, do business and communicate with each other. He was particularly sensitive to the need for artists to be supported and to work with the advanced thinkers of the scientific com-

munities to encourage cross-fertilization of ideas that would enable the flourishing of the new art forms. It was a given that the new technologies would restructure the ways urban and global societies would interact and influence each other. His mission was the preparation of artists and teachers of media whose mode of personal expression would grow from a cross-disciplinary base of general education, and further, to bring to the public an awareness and understanding of a new era of media literacy.

An extraordinary group of experimental artist/makers were attracted to the Center for Media Study at UB: Paul Sharits (film), Hollis Frampton (film/photography), Tony Conrad (film/video), Steina and Woody Vasulka (digital arts), James Blue (documentary film); and film historian/theorist, Brian Henderson. Their imprint on media development has been to nurture the growth of a pro-active group of independent makers and media scholars who have been involved in the mainstream of experimental work both in Buffalo and world-wide, artists actively creating avant-garde works, exhibiting, publishing and teaching in major institutions.



In the heyday of support from the New York State Councils on the Arts and Humanities and Education Department, and the federal programs, the National Endowments of the Arts and Humanities and the U.S. Information Agency, funding was attracted to Western New York for an amazing array of programs, many at the Center for Media Study at UB and at Media Study/Buffalo. Some particularly compelling programs from the 70s and 80s include:

Summer Institute in the Making, Knowing and Judging of Film/Media—1972-1979; supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, Public Media Program (14 courses, 200 participants each summer) at SUNY/Buffalo.

Conference on Teaching Making, December 11-17, 1973 (30 film and video makers, 10 representatives of grant-giving organizations, 3 days conference, 1 day seminar) SUNY/Buffalo, Media Study/Buffalo, Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

Women in Film & Video, February 16-18, 1974 (12 film & video makers, 3 theorists), SUNY at Buffalo.

American Seminar in Film—nine 3-day seminars with faculty and graduate students from Harvard, New York University and SUNY/Buffalo in addition to distinguished scholars, filmmakers and guests, 1975-77, supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

New York State Summer School of Media Arts—1976-1990, supported by the Alternative Education Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, and SUNY Education Department, the program provided a six-week intensive program of workshops in film, video, photography, creative sound, computer arts and holography for up to 75 of the most talented youth in New York State at SUNY/Buffalo.

Design/Electronic Arts Conference, March 10-13, 1977 (32 speakers/artists, 160 guests), sponsored by the Center for Media Study, SUNY at Buffalo and Media Study/Buffalo, supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the NYS Council on the Arts; at Marine Midland Center and Elliott Square Building, Buffalo.

Contemporary Directions in the Public Affairs Documentary, February 22-25, 1978 (23 speakers, 15 films and videotapes, 250 guests) sponsored by the Center for Media Study, SUNY at Buffalo, WNED-Channel 17, and Media Study/Buffalo; supported by the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

A few media projects originated in Buffalo under O'Grady's direction in this period should also be noted:

The Oral History of the Independent Film—over 50 interviews with filmmakers, four hours or more in length.

Distribution Problems of Independent Filmmakers—35 question survey of 1,000 filmmakers.

The Independents—two 12-hour series, "Dis/Patches"—arts programming—and "Agenda"—social issues documentaries by independent makers for satellite-cable distribution by The Learning Channel, Washington, D.C., funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, 1984-1985.

The Frontier—a series of thirteen programs of works by independent makers who reside within the target area of WNED-Channel 17, Buffalo. This series funded by the New York State Council on the Arts and Canada Council, 1980-85.

America Lost and Found—award winning feature length documentary film for public television on the 130th, \$150,000 National Endowment for the Humanities grant, premiere April 1980 on WNET-TV (New York Public Television).

Media

Film/Media—series of 13 televised interviews with filmmakers produced by Channel 17/WNED for national public television broadcast, January-May 1976.

HALLWALLS Contemporary Arts Center was founded by then local artists Charles Clough and Robert Longo in 1974. The art discourse of the founding group of artists was centered on the Post Modern idiom developing at the time, and the thrust of this collaboration of artists continues to this day to be the exploration of the personal expression of the emergent independent artists as they reflect their community, activate social issues, and network with independent artists in the U.S., Canadian and international media centers. This has been demonstrated in presentations over twenty years of programming reflecting the creative energy of regional media artists—art of the people, by the people, for the people in Buffalo, NY, coupled with screenings and lectures by world-renowned independents. Hallwalls often brings these artists to WNY in collaboration with other local media and arts centers such as Squeaky Wheel, CEPA Gallery, Langston Hughes Center, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, The Burchfield-Penney Center and the Department of Media Study at UB. It has successfully utilized collaborative funding in this unique media community, attracting the notice and admiration of the field.

When Media Study/Buffalo closed its doors in 1985, Hallwalls evolved into the premier venue for local independent screenings and for a wide range of international exhibitions and screenings of the moving image. Hallwalls offers the community in addition to regular film and video screenings, a video post-production facility with internships available to artists, weekly public access show, series of performances, installations, publications, travelling exhibits, an alternative art space, and a digital facility. They are known especially for specialized programs dealing with issues such as feminism, sexual orientation, AIDS, abortion, first amendment rights.

Video artist/curator Chris Hill, in a catalog for Media Buf: Media Arts in Buffalo, NY, an exhibit at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University in 1988, says, "Programmers are convinced that Hallwalls must remain a kind of decentralized uplink for some version of contemporary culture, and not merely a downlink for some distanced tastemaking authority.Hallwalls seems to have historically offered its artists/programmers and audiences a site for the performance of an unsettled attention, one which resists or confronts the easy framing of an artist's or curator's project." In addition to Clough and Longo, other artists who have curated programming for this remarkable institution are Kathryn High, Keith Sanborn, Tony Billoni, Steve Gallagher, Chris Hill, Catharine Howe, Barbara Lattanzi, Rene Bouissard, Jurgen Brunning, Ron Ehmk, Laura McGough, Armin Heurich, Julia Drzewkowski, Gail Mentlik and executive director, Ed Cardoni.

A much anticipated history of Hallwalls, "Consider the Alternatives" by Ronald Ehmk covers twenty years of programming & achievements. Now available through Hallwalls at \$20.

With the cuts in federal, state & county funding, it should be viewed with pride in the Buffalo scene that organizations like Hallwalls have been able to develop audiences & the support of alternative funding sources, adjusting their staff as necessary to continue to serve the media community. When I first went to a Hallwalls event in the early 80's, there were only four people participating, and a screening with an audience of fifteen was considered well

attended. As a result of a superior effort at marketing and fund raising, Hallwalls has developed a strong following and many sectors of public support for their diverse programming. As Hallwalls's constituency became more involved with national and international artists, SQUEAKY WHEEL, aka Buffalo Media Resources, opened its doors as an alternative film and video artists collective in 1985, providing media access and an artists' support forum. UB's Tony Conrad was the visionary and moving force, encouraging its first director, video artist Julie Zando, and the other young artists to submit grants for program support and services to the State Council on the Arts, to undertake collaborative efforts such as the 8 mm News Collective, and to publish a media newsletter, *The Squeler*. Ten years later, in 1996, Squeaky Wheel has a large storefront on Elmwood Avenue, a membership of over 400 artists and friends, a board of directors of 12 active artists and community leaders (Tony Conrad, Chris Hill and Brian Springer continue from the original founders group), an equipment access program that has now expanded to include computers, a cable program—Axelegrease, a library of video tapes and magazines, and provides regular workshops in video, film, documentary, digital arts and computer networking. Cheryl Jackson, director of Squeaky Wheel, is indefatigable in bringing artists together for the monthly open screenings, working with schools developing media programs, collaborating with colleagues in the WNY media centers and pursuing networking in New York State through the Media Alliance Update initiative. The driving impetus for this media center continues to be to foster the local media artists' work and provide a forum for discussion and action on current issues.

Visual arts organizations over the years have also entered the media arena as presenters of film and video series, visiting artists and conferences. The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Burchfield-Penney Center, CEPA Gallery (Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Art) and Big Orbit are notable participants.

The Albright-Knox (AKAG) has included exhibitions of the works of artists from UB—Stefana and Woody Vasulka, Hollis Frampton, and Paul Sharits have been accorded one-man exhibits, and most recently, in 1993, an installation by Henry Jesionka was shown. The annual Western New York Show now regularly includes a media component for regional artists. The Gallery's Jr. Group has also presented a regular film series, and of special note, for a dozen or so years the series featured distinguished directors from other countries, with filmnotes by UB's distinguished film historian, Brian Henderson. The future looks brighter, as AKAG has planned a new media initiative bringing works by internationally distinguished video makers, which will find a wider audience for new media work. Can we hope for a regularly scheduled film/video screening room at AKAG, such as one finds in museums in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia??

CEPA Gallery is another of the visual arts organizations which has had film programming under the aegis of Eric Jensen, Gary Nickard, and Lawrence Brosse. They also had a digital editing access program with artists' residencies in the

early 90s, which has come to an end with cuts in funding. Visiting independent media artists and workshops have been occasional features.

In the black community, Sunship Communications was an early player as the first community cable access center, and Langston Hughes Institute and the African American Center have in recent years brought in outstanding African American film and video makers to present and discuss their works to the Western New York community. Spike Lee and Charles Burnett were among those who appeared at Langston Hughes.

The advent of cable and the community access channel proscribed by the Federal Communications Act, opened a new venue for any citizen to learn to produce video programming and provide the outlet for its public screening. In 1987 a protest group, First Amendment Network, (including Tony Conrad, Chris Hill, Brian Springer, Armin Heurich, Cathy Steffan, Jay Burney and Akua Kamaui), pressured City Hall to open for discussion the need for a new public access operator. Their lobbying included videotaping Studio of the Streets, a weekly video program taped on the steps of City Hall by Tony Conrad and Cathy Steffan and shown on Cable Channel 18 (sectors of these tapes were also shown in the AKAG Western New York Show in 1993). A proposal for formation of Buffalo Cable Access Media (BCAM) which came out of the work of the First Amendment Network Committee, received the contract for public access in Spring 1991. They have served over 8500 people, and they offer the opportunity to all Western New York citizens to learn to make and present video work on their regularly scheduled programs on Channel 18. The Buffalo newspapers still do not list the program materials, so it is up to the individual or organization to do its own publicity. The path for cable access has been a bumpy one, with problems of ethics and control of what is shown on cable threatening to shut it down. The first Director of BCAM, Sharon Mooney, has moved on to California, and a new director search is now in process. The challenge continues to be to open the access even further, to somehow achieve listings so the public can be informed of what's "on air," and to further encourage local organizations to "speak out" about community issues on the cable channels. Uneven payment of funding from grants supporting BCAM plagues this, and many other cultural organizations.

Chris Hill, just returned from Prague, Czechoslovakia, brought a catalog from ORBUS FICTUS: New Media in Contemporary Arts, a major exhibition at the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts on Prague, November 1995-January 1996. From Buffalo, Brian Springer's controversial tape about off-air satellite transmission, SPIN, was featured in Japanese artist, Keiko Sei's presentation; Dr. O'Grady lectured on "The Historic Role of the Czechs in the International Media Arts"; Woody Vasulka (former UB digital arts Professor) exhibited and presented a lecture, "Gallery: A Place for Moving Images." In her catalog article, Keiko Sei highlights the media community in Buffalo as follows:

"Why is Buffalo, New York worth so much discussion? To discuss, use and create anything concerning media for interesting media art to be born, strong grounding within a community and public awareness is necessary. Public places, including educational settings, are thus necessary so that people can gather and discuss the current media situation and their projects. . . . Buffalo media artists always try very simple, plain, but effective means of expression and that often counters with the big mass-media business industry."

So, Buffalo gains recognition in far-flung fields, and Buffalo's media artists continue to find community and support for their work here in Buffalo's media arts centers, its universities and colleges. The new wave of digital technology is generating new energy—there is much to look forward to in the new art it will spawn.

